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C O N F I D E N T I A L JERUSALEM 000307

SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, SEMEP, AND NEA/IPA; NSC FOR
SHAPIRO/KUMAR; JOINT STAFF FOR LTGEN SELVA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KWBG](#) [KPAL](#) [KISL](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY MINISTER DELIVERS TELEVISED
SERMON ON TOLERANCE AND NON-VIOLENCE

REF: JERUSALEM 230

¶1. (U) Palestinian Authority (PA) Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs Mahmoud Habash delivered a Friday sermon on February 19, entitled, "Islam is a Religion of Tolerance and Mercy." Palestinian television broadcast the sermon live. The same topic was the official weekly theme for the approximately 1,800 mosques in the West Bank administered by the Ministry.

¶2. (U) Habash opened his sermon by stating that all "living creatures" were "sons of God," and that God had not differentiated among them on the basis of religion or race. He noted that Islam taught mercy. While Muslims were often treated unfairly by others, he said, they were nonetheless obliged to treat non-Muslims with mercy and respect. Habash said that Muslims had been specifically commanded to be courteous to Jews and Christians, and reminded his listeners that the Prophet Muhammad had told his followers, "Anyone who harms a follower of a monotheistic religion harms me."

¶3. (U) Habash, a former Hamas member who broke with the movement in the 1990s over its attempts to use religious arguments to justify violence, criticized Hamas for its 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip, saying, "We tell those who staged the coup: you need to fear God. This is a crime against God, religion, people, and the (Palestinian) leadership. This coup has weakened us, and distorted our image, and undermined our status." Habash also criticized Hamas's treatment of Gaza's population, saying, "You (Hamas) need to be merciful to the vulnerable people. You cannot hold more than 1.5 million people in Gaza hostage. This is a crime that must end."

¶4. (U) Habash drew a distinction between "resistance to the occupation" and prejudice based on religion, saying, "We are against the occupation. If we were occupied by an Arab country, we would stand against it." He spoke against the use of violence, saying, "Today, we call for peaceful resistance and non-violent resistance. Not because we are cowards, or because we fear for our lives -- but because it is effective. The Prophet Muhammad spent 13 years in Mecca practicing peaceful resistance. When one of his disciples asked him if they should use assassination, the Prophet Muhammad said no, we have not been commanded to do so. Today, we ask for peaceful resistance, which is effective in meeting the goals we aspire to."

¶5. (C) Habash told Post the sermon was in response to an impromptu sermon delivered by a "disturbed" (in Habash's assessment) Ministry employee in the Burin village mosque on January 29 (reftel). That sermon contained language inciting violence against Jews. Habash told Post that the January 29 sermon did not represent the PA's views and contradicted official guidance from the Ministry.

